



Cavitch, David. My Soul and I: The Inner Life of Walt Whitman [review]

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REVIEW

David Cavitch. *My Soul and I: The Inner Life of Walt Whitman*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1985. xvi, 193 pp. \$18.95.

David Cavitch's psychobiography of Walt Whitman attempts to demonstrate that the shape of the poet's career was consistently determined by his quarrel with his parents. Cavitch's Whitman is a solitary singer because he felt psychologically abandoned by his parents; he sees Whitman's finest poetry as an ambivalent resolution of a lifelong identity crisis, which was most urgent during his most creative years. At his finest, Cavitch offers extended close readings of the major poems which are attentive to the psychological compulsions of Whitman's style, offering unexpected pleasures in every chapter of this book. For example, one would not anticipate that Cavitch's critical interests would lead to an effective reading of "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," yet he argues that the poem's central metaphor enabled the poet to "keep his residual sexual conflicts buried." The ferry-crossing, he suggests, enables Whitman to "stay away from the shore and the things it symbolizes." At his weakest, however, Cavitch's emphasis on the poet's response to his original family context is sentimental and reductive. While Cavitch's style is refreshingly jargon-free and while his analysis sent me back to Whitman's texts with renewed interest, Cavitch's "family" thesis is narrowly Oedipal and based on assumptions that are already familiar to readers of Edwin H. Miller's *Walt Whitman's Poetry: A Psychological Journey* (1968) and Stephen A. Black's *Whitman's Journeys into Chaos: A Psychoanalytic Study of the Poetic Process* (1975).

Like Miller and Black, Cavitch concentrates on the first three editions of *Leaves of Grass* to delineate the psychosexual conflicts that caused the poet to announce, in a notebook entry which antedated the 1855 *Leaves*,

I cannot understand the mystery, but I am always conscious of myself as two—as my soul and I: and I reckon it is the same with all men and women.

Whitman's need to identify his uncentered self with the experience of others is just as important in this confessional passage as his self-bewildered tone. Cavitch glosses the passage as follows:

This entry reveals that Walt's anxiety was obsessive and private. He was "always conscious" of a "mystery" that he evidently tried but failed to "understand." And in a characteristic way, he looked to a notion of generalized male and female character—to "all men and women"—for some clue to the meaning of his divided self. At once helpless and self-indulgent in his plight, he disarmingly understates the misery of his sense of difference from other people in the casual conjecture and artless diction of "I reckon it is the same." Dominated by the two looming figures of his unattainable goals, Walt was divided by his ambivalence toward a mother who was too close, threatening to become his very person, and toward a father who was too remote, projecting masculinity as only an object of erotic love rather than an available principle of loving.

The effect of this gloss is to exaggerate the power of Louisa Van Velsor Whitman and Walter Whitman, Senior, and to diminish the power of the poet. By publicizing his

anxiety, Whitman renders it less “private and obsessive.” As I read this passage, Whitman may be “self-indulgent” but he is not “helpless.” Nor is he aware of his parents as “two looming figures” who are responsible for his divided self. Cavitch argues that Whitman’s poetry was an attempt to preserve a “rigid” family structure, yet this key passage does nothing to advance that argument, nor is there anything particularly “rigid” about the Whitman family as described by David Cavitch, although there is much that is troubling.

Cavitch’s argument that Whitman’s family did not understand him is entirely plausible. In a passage highlighted by Cavitch, a dying Whitman explained to Horace Traubel,

A man’s family is the people who love him—the people who comprehend him. You know how for the most part I have always been isolated from my people—in certain senses have been a stranger in their midst. . . . I have no more right to expect things of my family than my family has to expect things of me: we are simply what we are: we do not always run together like two rivers: we are not alike: that’s the part and the whole of it.

Yet to announce that Whitman more or less resolved his identity crisis in the 1855 version of “Song of Myself” by masturbating—by discovering in self-love that he could liberate himself from the parents who rejected him—is to traduce a worthy beginning.

Despite my admiration for Cavitch’s concluding chapter, which makes better sense of the Whitman-O’Connor relationship than any other discussion I have encountered, throughout this book I had the sense of what Emily Dickinson called a life “begun in fluent Blood / And consummated dull!” Cavitch’s analyses begin well and his critical project is an ambitious one. He seeks to describe the transformation of Whitman’s subjective life into art and to describe the effect on Whitman of his commitment to poetry. But Cavitch’s methodology is confused by his assumption that “poetry is not real life” but “the imagination is real life.” Such a statement causes me to wonder what is “real” about poetry and “imaginative” about life. Moreover, Cavitch’s enterprise depends on the assumption that Whitman’s poetry transformed his life. Such a transformation is “real” enough for me. Arguing in essence that Whitman came to renounce his vocation because it prevented him from actualizing himself as a social being, Cavitch nevertheless concludes, in his last paragraph, “At the end of his life Whitman never failed to believe in the great significance of his spirit expressed in *Leaves of Grass*, and he never deteriorated into indifference over the details of his work.”

Indeed, Cavitch argues that Whitman was an effective critic of his own work long after his original poetic vigor had waned. I wish that he had examined this remarkable paradox in greater detail. Thus Cavitch is less interested than either Miller or Black in demonstrating the superiority of Whitman’s original texts; he works with the 1891–1892 “deathbed” edition of *Leaves*, supplemented by flashbacks to the original versions. Although the poetic persona of *Leaves* claimed to speak for “Nature without check with original energy” (in an 1881 revision) and certainly never represented himself as an incessant self-reviser, as an editor of his own work Whitman was a harsh critic of the spontaneous “romantic” esthetic that he promulgated. But as I have already suggested, Cavitch’s most promising insights are often underdeveloped.

I was disappointed also by Cavitch's dependence on a set of biographical "facts" that merely reinforce the dark tone of the Miller-Black enterprise. Miller argues that Whitman's poetry empowered him to transcend his personal dilemma, and Black argues that Whitman's poetry eventually disabled him. Miller, Black, and Cavitch all tend to distort the affective tone of the Whitman household by focusing exclusively on its pathology. Whitman's mother, for example, is consistently faulted for her whining, and Whitman's idolization of her is consistently viewed as a refusal to face the facts. (This is true even for Cavitch, who argues simultaneously that in Whitman's view "his mother produced the poetry, writing through him in a creative process that he disclaimed as his own gift and insisted was a debt.") Yet Louisa Van Velsor Whitman's situation was enormously difficult, especially during her later years. True, she was parsimonious, but she was also indigent and very much dependent on her sons, especially Walt, Jeff, and George, who were more economically self-sufficient than she. Eddie, of course, was dependent on her, as were Andrew and Jesse during their darkest days. Her ability to support them depended on her ability to make do with little (hence the tomato dinners) and to cajole Walt, Jeff, and George into contributing to the needy household. Walt was generous and a bachelor—Cavitch views his life style as neurotically self-stinting whereas I view it as necessarily self-stinting—and Jeff and George had their own families to support. Although there is reason to believe that Mrs. Whitman was deeply and perhaps jealously attached to her healthy sons (especially Walt and George), her only identity during her later years was her identity as a mother. If Whitman perceived her as a gallant woman, as he did, might it not be useful to turn to her unpublished letters in order to discover how she viewed herself? But this kind of biographical research lies beyond the scope of Cavitch's enterprise.

In brief, Cavitch's Whitman is less the "stalwart heir" of the 1855 Preface to *Leaves of Grass* than the maimed offspring of a neurotically unsuccessful family. Subsequent psychobiographies will need to account not only for Whitman's weaknesses but also for his strengths. As his hapless father lay dying, Whitman told his prospective readers, "The corpse is slowly borne from the eating and sleeping rooms of the house." America, he announced, "perceives that it [the corpse] waits a little while in the door . . . that it was fittest for its days . . . that its action has descended to the stalwart and wellshaped heir who approaches . . . and that he shall be fittest for his days." In this 1855 Preface, Whitman was referring to the corpse of patriarchal convention, but the conjunction of his father's decline and Whitman's ascent into poethood is a provocative one, as Justin Kaplan and Paul Zweig have already observed. "My ties and ballasts leave me," the poet declared in what subsequently became Section 33 of "Song of Myself." "I skirt sierras, my palms cover continents, / I am afoot with my vision." The scope and disorganization of the Whitman household evidently allowed the poet who went forth considerable freedom. Despite Whitman's quarrel with his parents, which is abundantly apparent in such crisis poems as "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" and "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life," Whitman's poetry also depended on his psychological liberation from them. David Cavitch's book is useful in that it makes an extreme case for Whitman's psychological dependence on his parents. Subsequent psychobiographical criticism, however, will need to account for the fact that a misunderstood son could also appropriate the freedom to be "Both in and out of the game and watching and wondering at it."

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